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RIVAL INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

III. PROTESTANTISM—(*Concluded*)

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2. The Protestant Religious Spirit

A classic expression of the inner religious life of Protestantism is found in the answer to the first question in the Heidelberg Catechism: "What is thy only comfort in life and in death?" Answer:

That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.

In this popular statement the three great mountain peaks of the Protestant religious consciousness stand out clearly—*loyalty to a personal God, confidence in the orderly course of the universe, the sense of inner worth*. The different Protestant communions vary in the intelligence and firmness with which they hold to these fundamentals and in the emphasis they place upon them, respectively, but these convictions are characteristic of them all.

First: *The religion of the Protestant consists primarily in the consciousness of*

the immediate personal relation with God.

In the answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism it is stated theologically: "What is the chief end of man?" Answer: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." Here there is no blind or confused groping after an unknowable essence of deity or divinity, no vague surmise of the presence of an ineffable Somewhat, of a Silence or Abyss beyond all the range of human intelligence, but the affirmation of a direct contact with a personality as real and as definite in his existence as we are. Protestant theology may not have lived up to this standard always, but this is the Protestant faith. There can be no toleration of an effort to interpose anything between God and the soul, for this would be an insult to the divine prerogative and an injury to the human spirit. God reveals himself to man and confers good gifts upon him according to his own will. Man prays to God directly and obeys or disobeys on his own behalf. Hence the Protestant love for simplicity in worship. Hence the sternness with which the Protestants repudiated the mediatorial system of the Catholic church—its spurious sacraments, its prescribed devotions, its priestly intercessions and absolutions, its saints, its

holy seasons of fasts and feasts, and its legalistic regulations—not merely because they were absurd and vain, but because they were profane and wicked, a violation of the rights of man and a usurpation of the authority of God. Hence the determination of Protestants to reduce the tangled mass of teachings and usages that had held the multitudes so long in spiritual bondage, to the simplicity that they believed to have existed in the original faith of Christians. Hence also their repudiation of ecclesiastical authority in favor of the real authority of those Scriptures that came directly from God.

The religious view of God carried with it a religious view of the Bible. The demand for certainty in our relations with God implied a need for a pure expression of his will. This the Protestants found in the Christian (and Jewish) Scriptures. Whatever we may now say as to the value of the presuppositions with which they approached the study of the Bible or as to the value of their methods of interpretation, there can be no doubt that they made an honest attempt to understand its true and original meaning, and that not in the interest of historical or literary knowledge, but in the interest of their religious faith. They revered it as the “pure word of God” and sought to obey its instructions as the commands of God. The Catholic church had utilized the Bible in the interest of a system, but the Protestants sought to find in it the disclosure of the mutual approach of God and man, and to them largely we owe the exaltation of its religious value, even if, as we must confess, they often subordinated it to a system of

doctrines partly derived from another source.

The Protestant religious spirit moved between a negative and a positive pole. The *negative* pole was a sense of ill-desert. The catechumen who studied the Heidelberg Confession learned to speak of “my sins” in the very first sentence he uttered. The sense of sin lay heavily on the conscience of those believers. The language of the Fifty-first Psalm was spontaneous to them and it was often on their lips. They accepted from Catholicism and Augustine the doctrine of original sin because it seemed to utter the truth of their experience, and they intensified its meaning and tried to take it in its most fearful sense. When they spoke of sin it was not a metaphysical defect or want of true knowledge they had particularly in mind, but the contrast of the human character when they contemplated the holiness of God. Sin was moral, it was rebellion, it was spiritual turpitude, it was ill-desert; and they could find no better expression of its unworthiness than the Catholic doctrine of an endless hell of torment. Nevertheless, when they thought of God, the principal emphasis was not upon sin.

The *positive* pole of the Protestant religious spirit was a consciousness of being the recipient of grace. Here these believers followed Augustine and, like him, they emphasized the greatness of their sin all the more because they believed that thereby they exalted the divine grace. The sense of sin was only the dark background of the picture of their inner life. Their spirit was not gloomy in the end but it was filled with a joyful confidence. This is what made

their tremendous achievements possible. They were filled with the feeling of dependence on God, but it was not the dependence of the mere suppliant or beggar, or of the hopeless criminal on his way to the gallows. It was the dependence of one who was aware that the divine love had flowed out upon him and made him a being of the higher order. It was the dependence of the loved one upon the lover, such a dependence as finds its best expression in a loyal and hearty self-surrender. "I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." This is one of the things that made the doctrine of election and predestination so dear to them; it confirmed the assurance of the divine favor.

This union of the sense of sin and the assurance of grace rested on a vision of the cross of Christ. It was not that they contemplated the picture of his suffering as valuable for its own sake. It was not that they were trying, after the Catholic fashion, to repeat in their own souls the agonies of Jesus on the cross as the perfection of asceticism, but it was because they believed that "where sin abounded grace did abound the more exceedingly," and in the suffering of Christ they saw this principle in operation as an act of God himself. It was not the suffering of the cross so much as its moral significance that made it the center of their faith. They could live henceforth confidently and trustfully because this supreme gift assured all other good.

Secondly: *The faith of Protestantism appears in its attitude of assured confidence rather than trembling anxiety toward*

the course of the world. While mysticism sought to scorn the world, while Catholicism viewed it mostly with mingled fear and contempt, Protestantism takes a positive religious interest in it. Notwithstanding the occasional lapses of Calvinists, and notwithstanding the perpetuation of their Catholic inheritance of the view that nature had been corrupted and that the ills of this life are made great in order that our hearts might be weaned from it and prepared for the world to come, the Protestants drew great spiritual comfort and inspiration from the contemplation of the world of nature and of man. Lacking the modern scientific view of the constancy of nature, they enjoyed a religious anticipation of it in the conviction that events in the material world—from the movements of a planet to the stirrings of a blade of grass—and events of human history, even of the most trifling and seemingly fortuitous kind—from the bad deeds of wicked men to the sublimest sacrifices of good men—came under the direct control of an unerring and kind Providence. It was in no spirit of cold speculation or fatalism that the Westminster Confession asserted that "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass," but because it was, as Calvin held, the essential postulate of "the inestimable felicity of a pious mind." It was not that these people had consciously worked out a speculative view of the universe or fancied that they could demonstrate the truth of such a hypothesis, but because they had a consciousness of the indispensability of the divine presence at all times. They

must see God everywhere in order to be at peace in the midst of the turmoils of their time. What seemed inexplicable in a world that he made they felt must be governed "by the secret counsel of God." Everything in the world had a religious significance to them. Even inanimate objects "exert their force only in so far as directed by the immediate hand of God." They were not unaware of the danger to faith and to morality in such a view, but they were willing to endure those risks for the sake of the assurance it gave that "all things must work together for my salvation." This abiding sense of subjection, with all things, to God's will was quite in keeping with the Protestant conviction that there was free access to him in every place and all the world was a sanctuary.

Thirdly: *Protestant religious faith embraced a consciousness of holy inspiration, purification of heart, and strength of will.* The Protestants felt themselves superior to Catholics because the latter fell back on a belief in the mysterious gifts supposedly communicated in symbols, and lacked that "secret testimony of the Spirit" that gave the light of noonday to the human soul. It is true that utterances of Protestant piety abound in confessions of utter unworthiness and even worthlessness, but that was meant to refer to men apart from the grace of God—which was not their true self. It was this that enabled the Protestants to dispense with the absolution of priests, the mediation of saints, and the voice of the church to certify the truth to them, because they had the truth within them, because they felt that a pure heart could never receive punishment from God, and

because he who receives the divine assurance of blessedness in his soul can accept no other. Hence it was that they so often—extravagantly, it seems to us—regarded those who opposed their convictions as *ipso facto* enemies of God. Their doctrine of the Scriptures became a protection to them against the dangers of fanaticism to which such a faith made them subject. Indeed, it must be pointed out that they went so far as to persecute with extreme severity those who carried this sense of the indwelling of the divine Spirit to the whole length, and it sometimes became a very weak factor in Protestant life.

3. The Protestant Estimate of Human Life—Its Moral Outlook

It will hardly be contended that people who were ready to put men into prisons or send them to death because of a refusal to accept their beliefs on the highest and most difficult of all questions, or who regarded a large portion of the human race as heirs of the misdeeds of another and the inevitable consequences of those misdeeds by eternal divine decree and without their consent in advance, or who sentenced men to everlasting suffering for the glory of God, could have possessed the most exalted conception of the worth and sacredness of human life. Yet it is true that Protestantism maintained a high estimate of the human personality notwithstanding these shocking facts. Indeed, one might almost say that these very defects bear partial testimony to the dignity of the Protestant view of man.

In the bloody persecution of Catholics and other "heretics," the Protestants

proved that they had learned only too well the lesson that Catholicism had taught them. Human life appears of comparatively small account when it may be destroyed for a difference of opinion. On the continent of Europe in those days men generally felt small compunction on account of killing men for these differences. In England it was otherwise. Queen Mary was nicknamed "the Bloody," though she had executed for their faith *only* two hundred and odd people. On the Continent she would have been regarded as rather merciful. The Protestant statesmen of Elizabeth's reign declared that they had put none to death for their religious beliefs. But this was exceptional among Protestants. How it harmonized with the Protestant contention for the right of individual interpretation of Scripture cannot be shown. At the same time it does bear testimony to their view that men can be held responsible for their opinions.

It is somewhat the same with the Protestant view of an endless hell. That Christian men should be able to face with comparative complacency the prospect of such a fate awaiting the majority of mankind seems now incredible, or at least inexplicable. How can it be said that the human personality is sacred if it be true that "by the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others *foreordained to everlasting death*," that "their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished," and that the second class "shall be cast into eternal torments"? And yet it must be said that this terrible doctrine can be taken, not so much as an essential view of

Protestantism, but rather as a perversion of the profound conviction that the moral issues of a human life are so solemn that by nothing short of their eternal outcome can we estimate their meaning.

Taking such statements, then, not as adequate or correct expressions of the fundamental Protestant estimate of the worth of human life, we may see in them a clue to the Protestant conviction in this regard. That is to say, the value of the human personality is based, not so much upon its aesthetical or its intellectual powers, as upon its ethical quality and its moral possibilities. Human destiny is twofold because there are just two alternatives before men, and these are morally determined.

First: *Human conduct must always be interpreted in its relation to a holy, commanding will.* This will has been revealed to men in an inviolable law—the everlasting "thou shalt" and its answer, "I ought." This law, though manifold in its injunctions, is one in principle. A transgression of it in any one particular is a violation of the whole. It covers every relation in life and therefore it can be satisfied with nothing short of absolute holiness, unexceptional obedience. Its majesty is ineffable, its validity eternal!

There can be no compromise with its demands. There can be no neutrality toward it, there can be no division of loyalty to it. There can be no middle ground between obedience and disobedience. Therefore there can be no trifling with it, no exceptions to the moral imperative, no slackening of its claims, no compounding of felonies. As every crime is a sin and every sin a crime, punishment must be without

compunction or reserve. The sanctions of the law are inevitable. The dual destiny is essential to its authority. This it was, more than anything else, that led to the severity with which the demoralizing practices of the Catholic church were repressed in Protestant countries. The sale of indulgences and other modes of bargaining with the moral law were not simply foolish and vain in the eyes of the Reformers, but they were wicked and deserving of punishment. Unfortunately, we must add, this same sternness of moral judgment had something to do with the extravagant penalties that were visited by the courts on delinquents in Protestant countries. The grandeur of the Protestant conscience was sometimes turned into a spectacle of horror.

Secondly: *While Catholicism accentuated the negative side of morality, Protestantism laid its emphasis on the positive side.* It was not the qualities of renunciation, resignation, or self-obliteration that charmed the Protestant soul, but the exercise of the positive qualities of industry, courage, and determination. The Kingdom of God was to be won, not by retirement from the tasks of common life, but in the vigorous prosecution of them. Among the saints of Protestantism were the men of affairs. So insistent were the Reformers on the highest standards for all that they repudiated the idea of a gradation among Christians according to the degree to which they severally conformed to an ideal. The demands of the standard of life were absolute.

In this way the new form of Christian faith inculcated in its adherents a deep self-respect, a self-affirmation that

threatened at times to degenerate into self-assertion. The man was elevated consciously above the organizations or the society in which he found himself. Against the very institutions that had nurtured him he rose up in protest because of their defects. He judged and denounced the society that had conserved the very moral interests that he held dear, because it fell short of its own ideals. He went even farther. He challenged the very ideals to which he had been bred and called men to the higher. The Protestant was essentially a moral progressive, a reformer. He found no resting-place for his feet; he must ever go forward. Pure conservatism was stagnation and stagnation was death, the very negation of the moral. It was natural, then, that division should occur in the Protestant ranks as they sought the higher ideals. It was healthful, too. For it was not conformity to type—much as some Protestants sought it—that gave Protestantism its solidity, but in the inner imperative to transcend all types it found its firmness and stability. For the soul of Protestantism was in the man and not in the system. “Here I stand, I can no otherwise,” said Luther before the Diet of Worms—the man confronting the system and in those very words placing beneath the system a bomb that blew it into fragments!

Protestant morality is constructive. It builds from within rather than from without. It has more confidence in the power of personal initiative to work the good of humanity than in external restraint or constraint. It seeks unity, but the unity that dreads uniformity; a *unity* into which men grow and not a

union that forbids growth. Thus, notwithstanding its oft-repeated theological dogma of human depravity, its confidence reposed in that very human nature which Catholicism had taught its leaders to describe as fallen and destitute of good. Hence the Protestant churches, while insisting that good works—such “good works” as the Catholic church required as the condition of salvation—were in no sense saving, demanded, nevertheless, that the fruits of salvation should be manifested by everyone in good works. The Calvinistic churches, in particular, exercised a severe discipline over their members and even found in good works the assurance of their divine election.

Thirdly: *The ethics of Protestantism stands for the wholesomeness and sanctity of the natural.* Catholicism had put the stigma of uncleanness upon the natural. Natural modes of life and natural institutions were unholy until they had been brought under the cleansing power of the church’s sacraments. Even the wedded life and the propagation of the race are traced to evil, that is, fleshly concupiscence, until by subjection to the sacrament of marriage the evil character of it is purged. But, notwithstanding the use of the sacrament of marriage, the highest life, true Christian perfection, is found in celibacy. The wedded life, parenthood, are placed on a lower grade. The view of the natural institution of marriage carries with it a derogatory view of the other natural modes of life and the forms of their development, such as industry, trade, commerce, civil and political life, citizenship, the bearing of arms for one’s country.

From the first stages of its progress Protestantism consciously joined issue with Catholicism at this point. The Augsburg Confession argues:

The commandments of God and the true worship of God are obscured when men hear that monks alone are in that state of perfection; because that Christian perfection is this, to fear God sincerely, and, again, to conceive great faith and to trust assuredly that God is pacified toward us for Christ’s sake: to ask, and certainly to look for, help from God in all our affairs, *according to our calling*; and outwardly to do good works diligently and *to attend to our vocation*. In these things doth true perfection and the true worship of God consist: *it doth not consist in singleness of life, in beggary, or in vile apparel.* [All italics are mine.]

The Protestants saw that in the purity of the natural family relation the basis was laid for the purity of all those forms of industry and civil life which guard the family interest and supply the family’s needs. Here was the foundation of the view that the whole of humanity may be regarded as one great family founded in nature and therefore divine.

The Protestant sees the ideal of womanhood, not in the pale face and upturned eyes of her that wears the garb of the nun, but rather in the mother-heart and busy life of her who stands with uprolled sleeves before the washtub or rocks her baby to sleep in her arms or cares for the food and clothing of the inmates of the home. He sees the ideal of manhood, not in him of the shaven head or priestly gown who has scorned the love of the sexes, the affections and the trials of the home, the bargaining at the market-place, the administration of a city, or the execution of law and justice in the state; but

he sees the truly Christian man in him of the brawny arm and busy brain who plunges into the common things of life as his Father's business and finds the fulfilment of his heart's ambitions in the secular task of every day. When one finds that it is the Protestant peoples who are progressive in morals, in knowledge, in industry, and in politics, it is only what one should expect.

4. Protestantism as a Theory of Truth—Its Doctrinal Standards

On this involved and weighty subject it is not possible to say more than a few words in the present connection.

It is to be remembered from the outset that while Catholicism is fundamentally institutional, Protestantism is fundamentally personal. Catholicism has its sacraments; Protestantism has its truth. Catholicism insists on assent; Protestantism on faith. Catholicism inculcates submission; Protestantism inculcates knowledge. Catholicism, accordingly, regards its doctrines as legal requirements, as preconditions of receiving the church's benefits; Protestantism regards its doctrines as the very life of the soul, as the knowledge of the way of God to the heart of the man and the way of the man to the heart of God. Protestantism, therefore, takes its doctrines more seriously than Catholicism and takes special pains to inculcate them. Thus, while the ritual is central to Catholic worship, the preaching or instruction is central to Protestant worship. The priest gives place to the teacher and the sacraments to the doctrine.

The doctrines which Protestantism inherited from the Catholic church take on new vigor. For example, the Protes-

tant orthodox creeds accept, and renew allegiance to, the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. With the Catholic church these had become mysteries to be received without insight into their worth and they had lost their original meaning for the masses (and probably for the priests), having a sort of legal value only. The Protestant theologians renewed the vigor of these beliefs by impressing on the minds of men the need of a mediatorial sufferer to bear the guilt of sinful men, the actual enjoyment of the favor of God, and the certainty of an inner conscious renewal and fellowship with God in the Spirit. The old doctrines lived again, though in a very different sense from that which they had in the earlier times. The doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the God-man expressed the Protestant experience. There was a reconstruction, but from a different point of view.

If the heart of ancient Catholic piety lay in the longing for infinitude and immortality, the longing of the Protestant heart was for righteousness, the deliverance from guilt, and the peace and power of mind which righteousness produces. The redemption which Protestantism sought was not escape from materiality and death, but escape from condemnation. Its great doctrines begin really with its conception of justification. That is, God was first of all the Lord and Judge of mankind. The solemn scene of the court room is the best symbol of his relations with us. The redemption of the sinner takes the form of a process at law. It can occur only through the satisfaction of offended justice, and this can be only on condi-

tion of someone's bearing the penalty. The hopelessness of man is relieved by the appearing of a God-sent, divine-human sufferer who bears the eternal penalty and frees the sinner. The whole is an act of the unmerited and infinite grace of God.

It was natural that, when assurance of this great gift was sought, the answer to the inquiring heart should be first given in the affirmation that men are justified through faith and not by their works. Then, when it became necessary to assure men that the basis of such an estimate of faith was safe, the answer took the form of a doctrine of atonement. The center of gravity was transferred from an inward experience to an objective, divinely constituted reality. But there was incomplete satisfaction in this view till it was determined whether *I* and *you* are among those who are thus actually redeemed, whether there is absolute certainty of our redemption. The answer now takes the form of a doctrine of divine election and foreordination. And thus, at length, at the hands of the Calvinistic theologians, the whole career of mankind from the eternity of the past to the eternity of the future was construed as the outworking of an absolutely irresistible and sure divine purpose that involves the everlasting and unchangeable destiny of each and all according as the inscrutable will of God determined from eternity. Thus Protestant theology became a theory of God's government of the universe. The glory of God is everything and the desires and rights of the individual man pass out of sight.

It is plain that the theoretical basis of Protestant doctrine was Paulinism

interpreted through Augustine. More exactly, the Pauline experience and the Pauline exposition of sin and grace, narrowed to the Augustinian experience and theory of world-government, were treated as the heart of the gospel and the clue to the Scriptures. Everything else was brought to the test of this touchstone. Reformation theology was largely in substance a commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. The methods of the Protestant theologians were those of the Roman Catholic theologians purged of extravagances and ecclesiastical claims. Natural theology is accepted as far as it goes. It is supplemented and corrected by the Bible, which is the full and final revelation of God's plan of salvation. The teachings of the Scriptures were a unit. There was little attention to their historical setting and more and more they tended to become a law for thinking as well as for life. Speculations and queries tending to bring theological dogmas into question were dismissed as impertinent and profane.

5. Protestantism on Its Institutional Side

Here Protestantism stood rather between Catholicism and mysticism. It had not the Catholic realistic idea of the church. Christianity was greater than church. The invisible and spiritual "church" was greater than the visible and temporal church. Salvation was found only in the former, but was not dependent truly on the latter. And yet Protestantism was not clear on this point. It shrank from a full abandonment of the Catholic view of the efficacy of sacraments.

Sometimes, especially among Calvinists, there was held a legalistic view of the church. The Bible was the law-book prescribing its forms and its activities. Others, like some Anglicans and Lutherans, held to a looser view of the church and were more concerned to secure the independence of the state than the freedom of the church. Others, again, like the Anabaptists and the (later) Baptists, held firmly to the freedom of the church and had little to say positively of the state. On the whole, it is to be said that the Protestants found in their Christian faith a purifying and strengthening influence working upon the natural institutions of human life and raising the common to the level

of the holy. Thus, instead of the divine origin of the ecclesiastical order, Protestantism tended to exalt the divine sanction of the civil order. In place of the divine right of popes there was the divine right of kings or princes or parliaments. Instead of the supremacy of the priest in the life of the household there was the supremacy of the parent. Protestantism, therefore, on the whole, interpreted Christianity, not as institutional, but as a supernatural transforming energy working through the natural institutions of men and exalting them to be the natural instruments of God's grace as it works out a heavenly, beneficent purpose.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF FATHERHOOD

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It is with deep sorrow that we have to announce that DR. MCKITTRICK died shortly after finishing this article. In it we may therefore feel that he is expressing his own deepest conviction, borne of his wide and long experience as a religious leader.

There is no question in Christian thought as to the sovereignty of the Creator over his creatures, but there is considerable question as to what kind of sovereignty it is, and what are its relations to the personality of God and the consciousness and experience of man. The two words "sovereignty" and "glory" so overlap each other that we think of them together. The conceptions are joined in our confessions of

faith, and wherever the sovereignty of God is mentioned the glory of God is bound up with it.

It is important, therefore, in the consideration of God's sovereignty, to look into our conception of God's glory; the origins of it, the development of it, the colorings that are lent to it by the imagination, and the whole substance of it as it lies upon our thought and molds our thinking. Both secular and reli-